

The other side of the Trade War: The Waste War.

Brief considerations on the current situation of waste management in the Western World.

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Plastic



Paper

We are at the end of 2019 ...

and the international media speak only of Trade War, of duties and possible economic repercussions on global trade. But the so-called Trade War between US and China goes beyond the duties, imposed by the Trump administration. Far from the spotlight is there another war between superpower countries: Waste War. Yes, you have understood correctly: we are talking about the garbage, mountains of plastic and cardboard scraps that western countries produce and they are able only partially to recycle. What does China have to do with all this? It has to do with the fact that since 1 January 2018 the Asian giant - which bought up to 50% of all US and European plastic waste - has decided to stop being the dustbin of the world, blocking the importation of different types of recyclable waste and putting the United States, Europe and the entire recycling industry in serious trouble. According to a research conducted by Science Advances, only in 2016 China imported 7.35 million tons of plastic from 43 different countries, mostly western and developed.

In this context, how is Italy positioned? For once the situation is not so gray, despite repeated and localized waste emergencies, we are among the most efficient recyclers in Europe we can recycle over 75% percent of all plastic and paper collected. All right then? Not really in 2017 we exported about 1.8 million tons of paper bales to be recycled and about 200,000 tons of plastic bales to recycle of these about 70% to China.

The stop imposed by China on the import of these materials has created an emergency due to the lack of capacity to recycle all over Europe. For paper alone, Europe has a surplus of 8 million tons of paper to be recycled. Paper mills cannot follow the rhythms of recycling: the consequence is a saturated recycling market which, to date, has to deal with the collapse of prices, bales of pressed material, unprecedented and with the risk of loss of thousands of jobs. (only in Italy there is talk of 5000 jobs at risk). The plastics recycling sector does not enjoy better health, but in this case the solutions adopted are for the moment, especially in the Nordic countries, greater dispatch to incinerators or in some cases to landfills.

Once again it is clear that for the protection of the environment the problem is not the collection itself or the awareness of people. Bombarded with daily messages about the need to protect the environment, they are busy as they can. Differentiating, without any kind of specific training, disentangling from municipal norms that vary from country to country from province to province from region to region, but differentiating. The paradox is that we are talking about a sector, that of separate waste collection that is one of the main cornerstones of the circular economy, the pride of Italy, with very high recovery rates, reached years in advance of the objectives set by the European directives.

The real problem is the lack of an industrial vision that sees recycling as the only true way to solve the age-old problem of our society, that is the production of much more garbage than the environment can bear.

What is lacking are the installations capable of giving a second life to everything that citizens with difficulty manage to confer.

Because?

Because the answers that America and Europe are giving to the stop of China that has in fact brought the economy of recycling of Western countries to its knees, are always the same more materials toward the incinerators, more material in landfills ... Ecological Horror!

Many cities and states considered "virtuous", are no longer able to recycle waste and, while maintaining containers for separate collection, they are starting to ship everything without distinction to landfills or incinerators. The market for recycled products is too small and in the absence of public incentives, too expensive compared to the huge supply of "new" materials. Thus, after the Chinese halt, millions of tons of waste will remain within the American and European borders.

The possible alternative routes were quickly "burned", the Waste War also hit other countries, which initially allowed themselves to be enticed by the Chinese turnovers of the past. Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam above all. The aforementioned states initially showed willingness to accept the waste from the West, optimistic as they were towards the impetus that the sector could give to local economies. But they soon changed their minds. Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines have already engaged in diplomatic battles with Western countries due to dozens of containers of non-recyclable waste illegally entered, thus without the consent of governments. The new waste routes also pass through Turkey (+ 191.5% compared to 2017) and some Eastern European countries which, however, lacking the necessary facilities to dispose of the quantity of incoming waste, have been submerged by waste, which are added the domestic ones.

According to analysts, by 2020 the waste war imposed by China will cause prohibitive costs and serious logistical and environmental problems for many countries, primarily the United States. The end of recycling? According to a recent article in the New York Times, the ongoing waste war could lead to the end of the recycling economy. Why? Because of the high costs to be incurred to cope with the waste products, which far exceed those needed to turn out brand new materials. It goes without saying that industries would choose to produce from scratch rather than recycle. With the disappearance of the buyer par excellence, China, recycling intermediaries have in fact multiplied prices, sometimes quadrupling them. Simply because no country has the capacity to recover what China recovered. The market for regenerated products, then, is too small compared to the huge supply of materials to be recycled. Thus regeneration slows down and warehouses become clogged with materials that do not find market opportunities. What can you do? Short-sighted and short-term political choices but farsighted and based on solid scientific foundations. Focus on the modernization of production plants and on the disposal of plastics, reduce the production of recyclable waste (designed to be recycled) and invest in programs for the research and development of new biodegradable and compostable materials capable of replicating the characteristics of versatility and resistance of durable plastic. We'll be able to make it? Note <i>As always, the data reported have been found on various Internet sources and can therefore be partially incorrect, but beyond the simple numbers, the real situation is visible to everyone, and it matters little if it is 1 million or 10 million tons annually, the problem remains because the plastic materials continue to accumulate in the environment in which we live and of Terra nor do we have only one.</i>		
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